Dawn Burke

Response to Alfie Kohn’s “Standardized Testing and Its Victims”

It is so easy to respond to Alfie Kohn’s “Standardized Testing and Its Victims” considering I am a classroom teacher who sees directly that the facts outlined in the article are true. Even though PA is changing the name of its standardized test for PSSA to Keystone, the facts outlined in this article will remain the same. If anything, they may become even more pronounced and evident, but only time can tell about that. Considering this article was written twelve years ago, Kohn couldn’t be more correct especially when speaking about “non-instructional factors” affecting the standardized test scores, the use of tests to measure the quality of teaching and learning, and theft of time and use of standardized test-style materials to “teach to the test.”

As the article states, the inherent bias in the tests gives an automatic disadvantage to the less privileged students, especially those low income minority students in the inner cities. They are from families who are often in their situations because they themselves are not educated and who often continue the tradition of joblessness, gang activity and addiction. Because these students’ parents, though not all, are uneducated themselves, it is next to impossible for these parents to impart life education on their children. Standardized tests and the materials used to prepare for them include test questions and reading selections based on this basic “life education” that students born into middle and upper income families receive on a daily basis. Not only do these less privileged students have less of a chance at basic life lessons, they often do not have the advantage of a home and even daily meals to make them comfortable, another necessary factor in success on standardized tests. Because these students do not have the basic life necessities on so many levels, survival, not standardized testing, becomes their priority. The disadvantaged students who may want to strive to get out of a bad cycle their family is in may resent the focus on success on standard tests as opposed to the lessons and true education they may need to survive and succeed in a world that says the odds are against them.

New this year to my teaching schedule is a time of day now called “Enrichment.” In the past, this was a flex /lunch period in which students could make up missed work and receive much needed extra help from teachers. We no longer have the opportunity to do this. Instead, we are teaching out of those biased teaching materials Kohn mentions in the article. Each lesson in the book is assessed in the format of a PSSA test. While that is no longer the format being used as of this year, the idea behind it is the same – it is a standardized test. This is a double-edged sword. Not only am I not helping students with true learning of material they need help with, material that will help them succeed in their future endeavors of real life, but I am also assuming that my low-income students from under privileged families understand and connect to the information used in the reading materials used to practice for the standardized test.

While the rationale behind standardized test is understandable, it is also clear that they truly are a disservice to not only low income, minority students, but also to middle and upper class students as well as to teachers. Middle and upper class students who come from good families do not have to worry so much about the quality of their education in that many families, especially upper income families are able to fill in the blanks with private tutors and other institutions, such as Sylvan Learning Center. The negative impact it has on them is that time dedicated to other school activities has been lessened in order to make time for “enrichment” activities. In Palmerton Area High School, the enrichment time in which we teach from the books set up like standard tests has replaced time dedicated to extracurricular activities in addition to the time previously allotted for makeup work and extra help. This lowers their academic achievement along with their extra-curricular participation, two basic necessities for getting into good colleges. It also puts teachers in a precarious situation. When can we reasonably help the students who need to be helped and make up the work that needs to be made up?